



EMBASSY OF THE REPUBLIC OF THE MARSHALL ISLANDS

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Tom

July 12, 1996

The Honorable Frank H. Murkowski
Chairman
Senate Energy and Natural
Resources Committee
Washington, D.C. 20510-6150

**COPY FOR YOUR
INFORMATION**

Dear Mr. Chairman:

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide testimony to the Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee on S. 1804. The Government of the Republic of the Marshall Islands deeply appreciates your continued friendship, and your commitment to address issues in the Marshall Islands resulting from the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Testing Program.

During the July 26th hearing, you asked me to provide you with some figures. Specifically, you requested the number of people alive during the U.S. Nuclear Weapons Testing Program, and the numbers of claims which have been filed with the Nuclear Claims Tribunal subsequently.

According to the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, approximately 15,000 people were living in the Marshall Islands during the testing program. As of the beginning of this month, more than 6,000 personal injury claims have been filed with the Tribunal. To date, 1,230 people have received claims for a total of 1,345 radiogenic medical conditions. The Tribunal has made no land compensation awards thus far due to insufficient funds.

While these numbers provide a glimpse into the extent of radiation related problems in the Marshall Islands, it is impossible, for several reasons, to quantify the consequences of radiation exposure for human beings. For example, the 15,000 figure provides an indication of people who were exposed to external fallout from the tests. This figure does not account for the internal exposure which resulted from the ingestion of radionuclides from the environment. For example, radionuclides created by the testing program in the Marshall Islands continued to exist long after the final test in August 1958. As a result, children born in the years following the testing period were born at a time when little radioactive decay had occurred. Marshallese citizens

lived in a contaminated environment and consumed plants and animals from a contaminated food chain.

Marshallese in the northern and central atolls talk at length about the food crops which burned their mouths and produced blisters when they ate them. This did not occur before the testing period. Marshallese women who were externally exposed to fallout and/or internally exposed to radiation through the food chain experienced hideous reproductive problems which, again, did not exist in the Marshall Islands prior to the testing period. This is indicated by the names which Marshallese women give to these reproductive anomalies. All Marshallese illnesses which existed in the population prior to the testing have proper Marshallese names. These new reproductive illnesses, however, are referred to only through descriptive terms, such as the jellyfish babies, Devils, or turtle-like children they gave birth to.

The entire population in the Marshall Islands is affected by radiation: it is simply a matter of the degree of exposure. Because of the numerous variables which affect the degree which radiation exposure manifests itself in individuals (i.e. atoll of birth, atoll of residence, number of tests they were exposed to, the extent of reliance on local food products) it is extremely difficult to determine an exact number of people who are exposed to a level of radiation sufficient to cause ill-health.

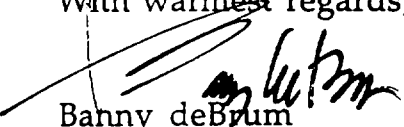
Although a delineation has been made which draws an imaginary line through the Marshall Islands - all Marshallese residing in the four northern atolls are considered "exposed," and all Marshallese below this line are considered "unexposed" - 555 Marshallese who are not from one of the officially exposed four communities have been compensated for radiogenic illnesses by the Nuclear Claims Tribunal. In addition to these 555 people, there are numerous others who have died from illnesses which appear to be radiogenic, but because they have access to only rudimentary health care services, it was impossible to provide the documentation necessary to successfully receive an award from the Tribunal.

Because the manifestations of radiation exposure in the human body are complex, and partially unknown, the Marshall Islands Government is reluctant to cage the problem in specific, quantifiable terms. For this reason, Mr. Chairman, the RMI Government requested that your Committee consider a request to build and maintain a hospital in Majuro. When the RMI has the capacity to treat its own population for radiation related illnesses, the RMI will no longer be entirely dependent on the U.S. Government for medical and health care assistance.

Chairman Murkowski
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Again, thank you for your willingness to meet with me, to allow a public discussion of these issues, and to address the needs of the RMI.

With warmest regards,



Banny deBrum
Ambassador

cc : President Amata Kabua
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